



Terrorism and Political Violence

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Sacrifice and fratricide in Shiite Lebanon

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Sacrifice and Fratricide in Shiite Lebanon

MARTIN KRAMER

Religion converges with violence at two points. The first is where religion is produced: by those who fashion and rework the beliefs and principles which congeal in a religious tradition. Such abstraction is a kind of intellectual production, and ultimately takes the form of accessible texts prepared by theologians and jurists. In the case of Islam, for example, the entire law of war is a series of codified abstract principles, defining when violence is obligatory, permissible, and forbidden, without reference to any particular situation. These principles have been compared, sometimes in useful ways, with other sets of abstract principles from other traditions.¹

The second point of convergence is where violence is produced: by those inspired by religious vision to employ force. That vision may be quite remote from the principles codified by religious authorities, or it may closely reflect those principles. Yet ultimately it is here that violence takes its corporeal form, where hands take up blunt instruments, where people meet to plan harm and shed blood. This second convergence of violence and religion rarely occurs in the open. It is more likely to take place in a remote village, where an obscure cleric, an expert on explosives, and a young boy might interact to produce a startling deed.

This essay explores one such obscure point of convergence between religion and violence. In 1982 a Lebanese Shiite movement known as Hizbollah – the Party of God – mounted the first ‘self-martyring’ operation. A short time later, similar operations were organized by Hizbollah’s Lebanese Shiite rival, the Amal movement. These operations took the following form: an individual would take the wheel of a truck or car loaded with high explosives, position that vehicle alongside a target, and detonate the explosives while still in the vehicle. In the resulting explosion, the driver was certain to die. The explosion also inflicted damage on the target, although its effect could not be predicted. The most destructive attack claimed 241 lives; other attacks claimed fewer casualties, and often only the life of the driver.

These operations were represented by those who claimed credit for

them as straightforward acts of war. Hizbollah's attacks were directed against American, French, and Israeli targets in Lebanon; Amal's operations targeted Israeli forces in Lebanon. Yet from the outset, this classification posed problems. For while the operations were conceived largely as acts of war, and therefore as politically purposeful, their very structure suggested sacrificial rite. The perpetrators went deliberately to their deaths; the planners deliberately sent the perpetrators to their deaths. In this essay, I will suggest that these acts of self-sacrifice and sacrifice were not only designed for their maximum impact as acts of war. They also served the function which René Girard has suggested for sacrifice: the diversion and dissipation of violence born of inner feud.

Not only did these operations drive away the foreign enemies of Lebanon's Shiites; they also served to forestall the outbreak of fratricidal violence from within. The competitive cycle of sacrifice, done in the name of Islam, averted a competitive cycle of violence among adherents of Islam. When this sacrificial cycle collapsed, the violence turned inward upon Lebanon's Shiites, in the form of a fratricidal war. The point of this case study is not to deny the character of these operations as acts of war, but to suggest that they simultaneously served to maintain an internal equilibrium among those who initiated them. Girard posited the violence of sacrifice as the origin of all religion, as the escape from the vengeful spiral of feuding which will decimate a human community if it finds no outlet. In this case study, the purpose is to examine how a religious community maintains inner peace, by initiating an (obligatory) sacred war which fades at its edges into (forbidden) sacrificial rite.

It is necessary to begin with a caveat, which today must preface anything that remotely touches upon Islam. Violent acts committed by Lebanese Shiites – mostly by Hizbollah, but also occasionally by Amal – are the subject of fascination and fear in the collective consciousness of Muslims and non-Muslims. Such deeds occupy a prominent place in many polemical treatments of Islam. This is not completely unwarranted, because Islam does thoroughly permeate the self-representations of those who commit such violence. Their discourse, which serves to contextualize violence both for adherents and enemies, is laden with the evocative themes of Islam. Some of their leading figures are clerics in turban who parade in rallies with gun in hand, and who justify violent acts by reference to the sacred history and sacred law of Islam. There are Lebanese Shiites who believe, and insist that others believe, that everything they do, and every life they take, is in fulfilment of Islam's obligations. Yet the fact remains that Lebanese Shiism is a fragment of Islam, limited to a moment in the experience of Islam, and to a corner of the vast

expanse of Islam. Nothing can be inferred about essential Islam from its experience.

The same can be said for the narrower context of Shiism. While Lebanese Shiism is a rather larger fragment of Shiism than it is of Islam, it is still only a besieged outpost of a faith within a faith. Hizbollah and Amal do employ the symbols of Shiism, and particularly the seventh-century martyrdom of the Imam Husain, since this resonates among Shiites of all classes. It particularly touches the poor, because the martyrdom is symbolically re-enacted once a year, and this often constitutes the most vivid and intimate experience of Lebanese Shiites with their tradition. Yet the proposition that these symbols predispose those who revere them to violence is untenable. Until recent times, few religious traditions so thoroughly disavowed violence as did the Shiite tradition long predominant in Lebanon as well as Iran.

For a thousand years Shiism in its predominant formulation was the creed of an oppressed minority, and deferred the obligation to wage jihad 'in the path of God' to the end of eschatological time.² Known for its passivity and quiescence in comparison with majority Sunni Islam, the Shiite tradition rested upon redemptive suffering, and most of its adherents did violence only to themselves in an annual penitential rite of self-flagellation. Historical circumstance transformed the unjust murder of the Imam Husain into a call for inner repentance rather than blood vengeance. Nor did the Shiite tradition urge martyrdom. The pursuit of martyrdom was deemed the heretical doctrine of extremist dissidents, not the duty of true believers. These were enjoined to survive and even disavow belief if faced with the prospect of persecution. This was nowhere in clearer evidence than in Lebanon. Until this century, Shiites dared not observe the anniversary of the Imam Husain's martyrdom through public processions and self-flagellation, as in Iran. Instead they met safely behind closed doors, where their grief took the form of mournful recitation of the tale of martyrdom. (The processions of self-flagellants, far from being an immemorial rite in Lebanon, are a twentieth-century innovation, first brought by Iranian immigrants.)³

The passage from weeping to self-flagellation was only the first step. The Lebanese Shiite community is in a process of stripping away these layers of pious restraint over violence accumulated through time and set down in books by earlier theologians. Parts of this community have revived the concept of sacred war between absolute truth and absolute falsehood. But neither Islam nor Shiism tell us why this generation of Shiites in Lebanon has reread tradition in new ways. They will not tell us why this community embraced a doctrine of sacred war that it had long ago disavowed, or why the obligation to survive has been displaced

by the duty to sacrifice the self. The answers to these questions can only be provided by understanding the particular predicament of Lebanese Shiism. The first (and briefer) part of this essay is a preface, devoted to an interpretation of that predicament.

I

The Shiites of Lebanon are aggrieved. Lebanon is a multi-confessional society, composed of Maronite Christians, Greek Orthodox Christians, Sunni Muslims, Shiite Muslims, and Druze. For centuries these confessional communities enjoyed cultural and often political autonomy, assured by the forbidding topography of the country. But as western Europe established a globe-spanning hegemony, Lebanon was gradually integrated into the European-driven world economy, and absorbed the full impact of the West. This impact, however, was uneven, and the last to be touched were Lebanon's Shiites. Traditionally they were concentrated in southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, two of the most remote regions of Lebanon. This afforded them some protection while they inhabited a corner of the Ottoman Empire. But once Lebanon had been constituted as a centralized and modernizing state, their isolation worked to their clear disadvantage. In their own areas, they suffered from the combined effects of neglect by the central government and exploitation by a semi-feudal landed elite of their own. Lebanon's Shiites rapidly fell behind Lebanon's other confessional communities by every quantifiable measure of social development, even as the dynamics of demography transformed them into Lebanon's largest single community. Eventually the surplus rural population began to flood into the least desirable parts of Beirut, where many lived in desperate conditions on a crumbling infrastructure built for perhaps a tenth of their number.⁴

Tied by their traditions to Iran, they had undergone an awakening in the 1970s under the guidance of Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, an Iranian-born cleric of Lebanese origin who fought neglect from without and exploitation from within. Sadr inspired a mass movement and militia known as Amal – an acronym, (meaning 'Hope') for 'Lebanese Resistance Battalions'.⁵ This movement was reformist rather than revolutionary, and called for a reapportioning of Lebanon's resources to reflect Shiite demographic preponderance. Sadr disappeared in 1978 while on a visit to Libya, where he was probably abducted and killed for reasons unknown. But the movement did not disband, for by this time it had become the armed defender of the Shiite community in the civil war which had begun in 1975. Still, some of Lebanon's Shiites, caught between an escalating civil war in Lebanon and the loss of their leader,

turned increasingly to Iran's triumphant revolution and its leader for inspiration and guidance. Iran, for ideological and strategic reasons of its own, encouraged Lebanon's Shiites to do so.

In the 1970s Lebanon's Shiites were made to assume another burden, as onerous as their despised standing in Lebanese society. Southern Lebanon abutted Israel, and increasingly became a battleground between Palestinian organizations and Israeli forces. Shiites responded either by fleeing the south, assisting the Palestinians, or resisting them. The level of violence in the south continued to escalate until 1982, when Israel invaded Lebanon to put an end to the Palestinian armed presence in the country. But although the Israeli invasion was not directed against the Shiites of Lebanon, it soon provoked their resentment. For Israel, despite its original intention, became an occupying power without a plan for withdrawal, and those who bore the brunt of this occupation were Lebanon's Shiites. Israel ultimately released its grip on Beirut, where the United States and France appeared as 'peace-keepers' in the very midst of the Shiite-populated quarters of Beirut. But Israel had no further plan for withdrawal, and many Lebanese Shiites discerned the outline of a plot to suppress the Shiites while Israel, the United States, and France fashioned their own order for Lebanon.

It is in this setting that Hizbollah first appeared in the summer of 1982. In the wake of the Israeli invasion, Iran sent a contingent of Revolutionary Guards to Lebanon, where they established bases in the Shiite-populated Bekaa Valley. They were joined by Lebanese Shiite dissidents from the Amal movement, and Shiites who had fought for Palestinian groups which had been driven from Lebanon. The new formation took the name of Hizbollah, the 'Party of God', after a verse in the *Quran* which promises victory to God's partisans. Pledging fealty to the Imam Khomeini, the movement declared its aims to be the transformation of Lebanese society into an Islamic order, the liberation of all oppressed Muslim peoples and occupied Muslim lands, and the transformation of a combined Islam into a world power on a global scale.⁶ By the middle of 1983, Hizbollah had spread from the Bekaa Valley into the Shiite quarters of Beirut, where it mounted attacks, including 'self-martyring' operations, that eventually drove the Americans and French from Beirut. Shiite resistance to Israel soon followed, and took the form of a relentless guerrilla war. Both Hizbollah and Amal (as well as other leftist and pro-Syrian groups) contributed to the resistance, which took the form of ambushes, road-side bombs, and self-martyring operations.⁷

It was this war, and particularly the self-martyring operations, which captured the headlines. Yet beneath these events, which seemed to unite the Shiite community, a subtle process of fragmentation had

begun. Before Hizbollah's appearance, virtually all of Lebanon's Shiites identified with Amal, subsuming their profound differences under the mantle of a charismatic leader. Hizbollah worked upon those differences, splitting families, neighborhoods, villages, and towns along existing lines, and infusing ideas into existing rivalries and feuds. Hizbollah raced through Lebanon like a hundred rivers along the dry beds of division that break the Shiite landscape of Lebanon. The potential for reciprocal violence was enhanced by the influx of arms, provided to Amal by Syria and to Hizbollah by Iran. On more and more occasions, in local settings, small-scale violence erupted, which took the form of gunfire and kidnapping between Amal and Hizbollah.

Yet for the first five years of Hizbollah's growth, that violence was contained and conflagration avoided. The clashes remained expressions of endemic local feuding, which sought shelter in the distinction between Amal and Hizbollah. But the much more consistent element in the relationship between the fraternal movements was imitative rivalry. They competed in professing their fealty to Khomeini, in distributing aid, in organizing marches, and in covering walls with posters. The violent dimension of this competition took not the form of internal strife, but competitive guerrilla war against the Western presence in Beirut and the Israeli presence in southern Lebanon. Both Hizbollah and Amal struggled to amass greater credibility as promoters of sacred struggle – in the number of attacks launched against foreign intruders, in the number of claimed enemy casualties, in the number of martyrs offered to the cause, and ultimately in the preparedness to mount self-martyring operations.

This struggle culminated in the withdrawal from Lebanon of the United States and France and the retreat of Israel to a narrow zone in southern Lebanon. To most observers, this represented an instance of successful and unified resistance against an onerous foreign occupation. Few noticed the evidence of imitative rivalry that drove the sacred war forward, and that channeled the growing antagonism between Hizbollah and Amal into competitive displays of violence against intruders. The competitive war served the vital function of absorbing the violence that would otherwise have manifested itself in conflict both between Amal and Hizbollah, and within those movements themselves. The jihad, while liberating the believers from foreign intruders, also postponed the incipient *fitna* – the destructive strife that threatened Lebanon's Shiite community from within.

II

The rivalry reached its apex in a series of self-martyring operations which were initiated by Hizbollah, and subsequently imitated by Amal.

No aspect of the struggle had the same effect upon the Shiite community as these operations, which thrilled, fascinated, and repelled at once. This was particularly true of the two operations, one by Hizbollah and one by Amal, which first introduced the technique in the struggle against Israel in southern Lebanon. The attacks against the US and French contingents of the Multinational Force in Beirut were far more deadly, but the anonymity of the bombers, preserved to this day, established a distance between the community and the acts. But the poster visages of the two self-martyrs who allegedly brought the method to the south are readily recognized throughout Shiite Lebanon. So too is the lore behind the visages. And within that lore are grains of evidence which open new possibilities of interpretation. This is true even if the actual identities of the self-martyrs cannot ever be independently established. The following accounts, stripped of embellishment, convey the essential information:

On 11 November 1982 a gas explosion gutted an eight-story building used by the Israeli occupation forces in Tyre in southern Lebanon. In the conflagration, 60 Israeli soldiers and 14 others died. The Israeli authorities announced that the blast was the result of an explosion of gas balloons, although there was considerable speculation that the attack had been a deliberate bombing. Islamic Jihad did not claim the act as a self-martyring operation, suggesting that it had been the result of time bombs infiltrated into the building. Little more was said until May 1985, when Hizbollah's Islamic Resistance gave a different account, claiming that the building had been demolished by an explosive-laden car driven by a self-martyr. The announcement attributed the act to Ahmad Qusayr, a 15-year-old from Dayr Qanun al-Nahr, a Shiite town about ten miles inland from Tyre.⁸ It is impossible even now to pronounce definitively on the origin or authorship of the explosion.

Ahmad Qusayr was born in 1967, and had an unexceptional childhood. He left school after fifth grade and went to work for his father, who ran a fruit and vegetable stall in the town. He then went to Saudi Arabia where he worked for three months as a hospital orderly to save money. Upon his return, he began to drive a pick-up truck bought by his father, from which he sold produce. He would also go regularly to the mosque for prayer, and help to decorate and clean it. Like most local boys, he also enjoyed hunting and the outdoors.

Ahmad did not become a fighter himself, but he fell under the influence of young men who were fighters. He began to run small errands for them, such as smuggling arms and tracking the movements of Israeli patrols while he delivered produce. Then he began to drive the pick-up

to Beirut, leaving before sunrise and returning after sunset, without offering explanations. His father, who saw that he was not carrying produce on these trips, assumed he was running weapons. Then one day he borrowed his father's passport and transferred the registration of his truck to his father's name. He disappeared a few days before the operation, plunging his family into worry; his father went to Beirut to find him. Perhaps he had been kidnapped, perhaps he was being held by Christian militiamen. His parents learned of Ahmad's mission only when Hizbollah revealed his self-martyrdom two and a half years after the operation.

On 17 June 1984, a Lebanese car approached an Israeli military patrol in southern Lebanon. As the patrol and the car met, the driver of the car detonated high explosives packed in the vehicle, killing himself and wounding a number of Israeli soldiers. Credit for the operation was immediately claimed by Amal, which identified the self-martyr as Bilal Fahs, a 17-year-old from the town of Jibshit, near Nabatiyya in southern Lebanon.⁹

Bilal Fahs was born in 1967 to an impoverished family. His father sold vegetables from a cart, and lived in a one-room cinder-block house on the edge of town. Bilal's mother separated from his father a few months after Bilal's birth; the father remarried and had more children, crowding the house beyond endurance. Bilal spent most of his days in the room of his paternal grandmother. Bilal's father had not registered his marriage to Bilal's mother with the religious courts, which in Lebanon have jurisdiction over civil status. Bilal therefore did not receive an identity card, and so he could not be admitted to school, although he did learn to read and write. He drifted between Jibshit and the southern suburbs of Beirut, where he had aunts and uncles, and he did some occasional fighting for Amal. Eventually he became a bodyguard to Amal leader Nabih Birri. One year and two months before the operation, he became engaged, but encountered bureaucratic difficulties in legally marrying because his existence was nowhere registered and he had no proof of identity. The dynamic young prayer leader in Jibshit tried to help him straighten out the matter with the religious courts, but the outcome of this intervention is unknown.

Bilal's fiancée later said that during the three months before the operation, she saw a change in Bilal. He spoke at length about the prayer leader of Jibshit, allegedly killed at the hands of the Israelis, and listened to every item of news about the resistance in the south. He carried photographs of martyred fighters, read some Islamic books, and watched war movies and films about Islam. In his last letter,

addressed to Amal leader Birri, he wrote: 'I will that my brothers in the movement all join hands in the jihad enjoined upon us by the Imam-Leader [Khomeini], and that we will persevere however many obstacles there might be, under the leadership of the giant fighter of the jihad, brother Nabih Birri'.

Like all evidence, this raises at least as many questions as it answers. Like all evidence, it is incomplete and perhaps it changes nothing. It is still possible to represent these self-martyring operations as a straightforward extension of war, and the product of the tactical acumen of their planners. Given the fundamental asymmetry of power between the two Shiite movements and their adversaries, the techniques of guerrilla warfare and self-martyring operations constituted a tactical response ideally suited to their limited resources. It is also possible to continue to represent them as acts of individual self-sacrifice, inspired by hatred of foreign intruders, religious vision, vengeance, or psychological disorder. Such interpretations have been suggested not only for these operations, but also for comparable instances at other times and places in Islamic history.¹⁰

But knowing the identities of the self-martyrs (or at least their alleged identities) while not banishing other interpretations, does suggest new possibilities. The one that emerges with the least coaxing is the existence of a social dimension of sacrifice in the operations. This dimension is still partly obscured from view, for the biographical accounts completely conceal the identities and methods of those who sponsored the self-martyrs. But the moment we become acquainted with Ahmad Qusayr and Bilal Fahs, we realize that while self-martyrs sacrificed themselves, they were also sacrificed by others. They were selected, prepared, and guided toward their self-martyrdom, a fact admitted in a general manner in the announcements published by sponsoring organizations after the operations. The self-martyring operations combined self-sacrifice and sacrifice, and blurred the distinction between the two. It is not at all certain that the two elements can now be separated for purposes of analysis. But the sacrificial dimension was most transparent in a simple truth about the operations: the self-martyrs were not self-selected, but had to meet criteria that were socially and culturally defined.

The precise criteria for selection were never made explicit, but the selected self-martyrs shared a number of characteristics that were valued above others. First, they had to be male. That this constituted a form of selection became evident in 1985, when a Syrian-backed nationalist party launched a wave of similar operations that included several women, among them Shiites. The laws of sacred war in Islam do not permit women to serve as combatants, and for Hizbollah or Amal to have

employed women in these operations would have undermined their character as sacred acts of war. This position was explained by one of Hizbollah's clerics:

One of the nationalist women asked me, does Islam permit a woman to join in military operations of the resistance to the occupation, and would she go to paradise if she were martyred? The jihad in Islam is forbidden to women except in self-defense and in the absence of menfolk. In the presence of men, the jihad is not permissible for women. My answer to this woman was that her jihad was impermissible regardless of motive or reason. She could not be considered a martyr were she killed, because the view of the law is clear. There can be no martyrdom except in the path of God. That means that every martyr will rise to paradise. I do not deny the value of the nationalist struggle (*nidal*) against Israel, but the jihad of women is impermissible in the presence of men. I do not deny women of the right to confront the enemy, but we must ask whether all of the nationalist men are gone so that only the women are left, or whether their men have become women and their women have become men.¹¹

This position was confirmed after the self-martyrdom of Bilal Fahs, when his fiancée sought to 'join him in paradise' by undertaking an operation similar to his. Despite well-publicized efforts, she found no cleric prepared to declare her sacrifice permissible.

Second, the 'self-martyrs' had to be old enough to be deemed individually responsible for their acts, yet too young to have incurred the obligations of marriage. Their sacrifice could not be left open to the criticism that it had infringed upon the rights of parents or the claims of wives and children, from whom the planning of the act would have to be concealed. On the one hand, this meant that persons below a certain age could not be recruited. One of Hizbollah's clerics, asked whether young persons could fight without permission of parents, answered, 'When the plan establishes the necessity of their going out to fight, then going out is obligatory, and the agreement of the two parents is not necessary. If their going out is not necessary in the framework of the plan, then they must consult with the two parents'.¹² Since self-martyrdom did not demonstrably require a minor for operational purposes, and no parent would knowingly consent to a son taking part in such an operation, the employment of minors was virtually forbidden. But given the fact that death was assured in such operations, the same ban was extended to husbands and fathers. The sacred war of which the self-martyring

operations were a part did include married men with families, some of whom were killed. But the fact of selection, by which the self-martyring operations passed into sacrificial acts, required more stringent limits. Given the early age of marriage in Lebanese Shiite society, this placed a low ceiling on the age of possible candidates. The remaining window of opportunity was correspondingly small. Ahmad Qusayr at 15 still lived at home, and was almost too dependent to qualify; Bilal Fahs at 17 was already engaged to be married, and almost too attached to qualify.

Third, the self-martyr could have no ties to anyone who might consider himself socially responsible for avenging the death against its sponsors, which would be conceivable were the operation to fail tactically. Ahmad Qusayr had no older brother, while Bilal Fahs was the sole product of a dissolved marriage without legal standing, and lived as an outcast. Girard writes that sacrificial victims must lack some crucial social link, so that 'they can be exposed to violence without fear of reprisal. Their death does not automatically entail an act of vengeance'.¹³ The lack of fundamental social ties – to responsible parents, dependent wives and children, avenging brothers – rendered both of these self-martyrs acceptable candidates for sacrifice.

Finally, those selected for self-martyrdom had to have a minimal measure of pious intent, and no traits understood in surrounding society as signs of emotional disorder. 'The efficacy of the rites', writes Girard, 'depends on their being performed in the spirit of *pietas*, which marks all aspects of religious life'.¹⁴ This spirit must embrace the self-martyr himself, and is usually demonstrated in a published will and the testimony of parents and friends. Motive must not be patently impure; if it is, the sacrifice is unworthy of the sacred cause.

Selection of the self-martyr, which is made secretly but on behalf of all, is thus a social and cultural selection. When the self-martyring operations are understood as collective rather than individual acts – as sacrificial acts – the dynamic of the sacrificial competition becomes clear. That competition took place on the level of sponsorship, as Hizbollah and Amal sought to demonstrate their capacity for mobilizing the many resources necessary for the operations. For Hizbollah and Amal were fraternal movements in an almost literal sense; lines of allegiance ran through families, villages, and neighborhoods. The pursuit of balance became fundamental to the preservation of peace between them, and when Hizbollah initiated self-martyring operations, Amal had no choice but to do the same. The sacrifice of Ahmad Qusayr (and the still unnamed self-martyr of Islamic Jihad who did a comparable operation a year later) sealed the fate of Bilal Fahs. If many of the foreign intruders

also perished, so much the better, but the impure need not die with the pure for the act to be sanctified. Although Bilal Fahs killed no one it did not detract from the value of his sacrifice as a counter-point to the sacrifice of Ahmad Qusayr. The monument which Amal erected to Bilal served to commemorate the self-martyr and remind the community that his sponsors commanded the resolve and resources to sacrifice him for the good of all.¹⁵

That the military outcome of the self-martyring operations did not necessarily matter became apparent in their diminishing yield. Perhaps the first casualty of the competition was operational planning, which became less thorough as Hizbollah and Amal (soon joined by leftist and Syrian-sponsored parties) worked to outbid one another in the frequency of their operations. The sacrifice was no longer expected to obtain immediate results; self-martyrdom was presented increasingly as its own reward. At the same time, Hizbollah and Amal sought to elevate the standard of the sacrificial self-martyrs, by selecting slightly older youths who had more thorough religious and ideological commitment, and who had demonstrated the depth of their commitment by past involvement in conventional operations. One such instance was the bombing organized by Hizbollah on 19 August 1988, which sacrificed a most promising cadre, Haytham Subhi Dabbuq, from Tyre. Dabbuq was 20 years old at the time of his operation. He had joined Hizbollah's 'Islamic Resistance' at the age of 14, later taken part in conventional operations, and once had been wounded. After graduating from high school in 1986, he visited Iran, where he underwent religious and advanced military training.¹⁶ From the point of view of selection, Dabbuq was the ideal self-martyr. From a military standpoint, it was considered unfortunate that his operation failed to kill any Israelis, but his death had its own redemptive quality and demonstrated Hizbollah's willingness to sacrifice its most promising young recruits. As purer self-martyrs were offered for fewer immediate results, the measure of sacred war in the operations diminished, and that of sacrifice increased.

III

So far, the role of the Shiite clerics has been omitted from this account, and for good reason. Their identities, like those of the actual planners and organizers of the attacks, are still unknown, making it impossible to define their role in the genesis of the attacks. It might have been the role of Lebanon's Shiite clerics, at some level, to have assured the self-martyr that his sacrifice enjoyed the highest sanction. According to one of Hizbollah's leading clerics,

... those who blew up the [US] Marines headquarters and the Israeli military governate in Tyre [Ahmad Qusayr] did not martyr themselves in accord with a decision by a political party or movement. They martyred themselves because the Imam Khomeini permitted them to do so. They saw nothing before them but God, and they defeated Israel and America for God. It was the Imam of the Nation [Khomeini] who showed them this path and instilled this spirit in them.¹⁷

But regardless of the role of the clerics in conveying this sanction to the self-martyrs themselves, the support of the community depended largely upon the verdict of clerics on the admissibility of the operations. And since Hizbollah and Amal entered the sacrificial competition also to win a larger share of Shiite allegiances, the sanction of the clerics was valued by both. It was widely understood that the self-martyring operations were religious acts, but only in an emotional sense. Religious feeling had helped to generate them, but in a raw and dangerous form with strong sacrificial overtones. They could be made *Islamic* only by sanctification, which takes the form of reconciliation between the act and abstract principle, done by those qualified to interpret sacred law.

The Shiite clerics had no difficulty in urging armed resistance to perceived enemies, and indeed did everything in their power to encourage it. They achieved this, at least in part, by the transference of Shiite anguish from self to other. That anguish found its most vivid ritual expression on Ashura, the annual Shiite day of mourning for the seventh-century martyrdom of the Imam Husain at Karbala. There were some whose zeal for ritual self-flagellation on Ashura landed them in hospital, especially in Nabatiyya in the south, where the practice had the longest tradition in Lebanon.¹⁸ Hizbollah's leading cleric sought to transform such self-immolation into the immolation of others, when he called upon self-flagellants to desist from the practice and join the resistance against Israel:

Do you want to suffer with Husain? Then the setting is ready: the Karbala of the South. You can be wounded and inflict wounds, kill and be killed, and feel the spiritual joy that Husain lived when he accepted the blood of his son, and the spiritual joy of Husain when he accepted his own blood and wounds. The believing resisters in the border zone are the true self-flagellants, not the self-flagellants of Nabatiyya. Those who flog themselves with swords, they are our fighting youth. Those who are detained in [the Israeli detention camp in] al-Khiyam, arrested by Israel in the region of Bint Jubayl, they are the ones who feel the suffering

of Husain and Zaynab. Those who suffer beatings on their chests and heads in a way that liberates, these are the ones who mark Ashura, in their prison cells.¹⁹

This kind of argument abolished a vital distinction, transforming struggle against the self – the ritual purpose of self-flagellation – into struggle against the other. And following the initial successes of the self-martyrdom operations, Shiite clerics were inclined to do the same, this time abolishing the distinction between death at the hands of others and death at one's own hands. According to Hizbollah's leading cleric, if the aim of one who destroyed himself in such an operation 'is to have a political impact on an enemy whom it is impossible to fight by conventional means, then his sacrifice can be part of a jihad. Such an undertaking differs little from that of a soldier who fights and knows that in the end he will be killed. The two situations lead to death; except that one fits in with the conventional procedures of war, and the other does not'.²⁰ In another formulation, he determined that 'the Muslims believe that you struggle with a gun by transforming yourself into a living bomb like you struggle with a gun in your hand. There is no difference between dying with a gun in your hand or exploding yourself'.²¹ 'What is the difference between setting out for battle knowing you will die after killing ten [of the enemy], and setting out to the field to kill ten and knowing you will die while killing them?'²²

Yet the ratio of ten to one could not be guaranteed, and when it dropped precipitously, the sacrificial dimension of the operations came into clearer focus. At that point, although operations continued to contribute to the inner equilibrium of the community, they had lost their value as acts of war. On that score, some Shiite clerics began to reason that the self-martyring operations had lost their Islamic justification. A failed military tactic now threatened to degenerate into a purely sacrificial rite. The Shiite clerics understood, as Girard writes, that 'the sacrificial act appears as both sinful and saintly, an illegal as well as a legitimate exercise of violence'.²³ And when it appeared more sinful than saintly, it had to be banned.

The Shiite clerics therefore issued a conditional ban. According to Hizbollah's leading cleric, 'we believe that self-martyring operations should only be carried out if they can bring about a political or military change in proportion to the passions that incite a person to make of his body an explosive bomb'. He deemed past operations against Israeli forces 'successful in that they significantly harmed the Israelis. But the present circumstances do not favor such operations anymore, and attacks that only inflict limited casualties (on the enemy) and destroy one

building should not be encouraged, if the price is the death of the person who carries them out'.²⁴ 'The self-martyring operation is not permitted unless it can convulse the enemy. The believer cannot blow himself up unless the results will equal or exceed the [loss of the] soul of the believer. Self-martyring operations are not fatal accidents but legal obligations governed by rules, and the believers cannot transgress the rules of God.'²⁵ This ruling undermined the sacrificial cycle which had bound up Hizbollah and Amal in a competitive race to produce self-martyrs. A few more operations have been launched since then at very wide intervals of time. But the field was largely left to smaller factions, whose sponsorship of additional operations did not threaten either Hizbollah or Amal. Yet the end of the sacrificial cycle did not end the fraternal rivalry between Hizbollah and Amal. Its violence would soon find another outlet.

IV

One morning in January 1989 several Shiite villages in the area known as the 'Apple Region' of southern Lebanon became a killing ground. Before dawn a group of several hundred Hizbollah fighters, with photographs of Khomeini affixed to their chests, entered the villages by surprise. But this time their targets were not Israelis. Instead they sought out sleeping adherents of the rival Amal movement, and in the darkness a massacre ensued. Some of the victims were shot; others had their throats cut. In a few instances, the killing engulfed the families of the victims. This was later confirmed when photographers and cameramen entered the villages. One villager, choking back tears and standing over a pool of blood in his garden, told of how two masked men of Hizbollah had seized a member of Amal and slaughtered him 'like a sheep'. Clerics in Beirut had to issue rulings prohibiting the deliberate mutilation of bodies.

It was but one episode, albeit a particularly gruesome one, in the decline of Lebanon's Shiite community into *fitna* – internal strife, the antithesis of sacred war, pitting brother against brother in violence that threatens to destroy the community itself. For as Israel withdrew to a narrow belt in southern Lebanon, the fraternal movements of Hizbollah and Amal contested the ground they had liberated. The conflict that had always existed between Hizbollah and Amal now threatened to rise up and gut the Shiite community itself. 'Inevitably', writes Girard, 'the eroding of the sacrificial system seems to result in the emergence of reciprocal violence. Neighbors who had previously discharged their mutual aggressions on a third party, joining together in the sacrifice of an "outside" victim, now turn to sacrificing one another'.²⁶ The fratricide began in early 1988. Then came assassinations: one of Hizbollah's clerics

was shot dead in an ambush done by Amal, two of Amal's foremost leaders in the south were gunned down in their car by Hizbollah. The weekly newspapers of both movements repeatedly published photographs of the bullet-torn bodies of the slain leaders.

The fratricide has continued ever since, punctuated by failed cease-fires mediated by outsiders. For sheer ferocity, these recurrent clashes matched any conflict between militias from different confessional communities. Clerics in the community appealed for an end to the conflict and banned the killing of Muslims by Muslims, but to no avail. For passions ran too deep, and the self-martyrdom operations had already made their destructive suggestion: that one Muslim might legitimately consign another to death in the name of Islam.

'Religion shelters us from violence just as violence seeks shelter in religion'.²⁷ The violence sheltered by Lebanese Shiism was perhaps that same violence which attended the birth of Shiism. It had been suppressed and subsumed, until all that remained was the sacrifice of tears, shed once a year for the martyrdom of the Imam Husain. But in our time, that violence has broken free of the bonds of pious restraint. Self-repentance yielded to self-flagellation, then to sacred war and individual self-martyrdom. With the passage to fratricide, some in Lebanon's Shiite community shed the last restraint. It remained to be seen whether the clerics could break the cycle by invoking the logical core of Islamic law, or whether the community would pass completely to the passionate pursuit of self-destruction.

NOTES

1. In particular, see Albrecht Noth, *Heiliger Krieg und Heiliger Kampf in Islam und Christentum: Beiträge zur Vorgeschichte und Geschichte der Kreuzzüge* (Bonn: Ludwig Röhrscheid, 1966).
2. In theory, jihad can only be invoked in Shiite Islam at the command of the infallible Imam. Since that Imam is in occultation, the duty of jihad is theoretically in abeyance. However, there developed a contrary view that defensive jihad is permissible even in the absence of the infallible Imam. See Etan Kohlberg, 'The Development of the Imami Shi'i Doctrine of Jihad', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* (Wiesbaden), Vol. 126 (1976), pp.64-86.
3. For the history of the rite in Lebanon, see Frédéric Maatouk, *La représentation de la mort de l'Imam Hussein à Nabatieh (Liban-Sud)* (Beirut: Centre de Recherches, Institut des Sciences Sociales, Université Libanaise, 1974), pp.41-48.
4. On the social transformation of the Shiite community, see Salim Nasr, 'La Transition des Chiites vers Beyrouth: mutations sociales et mobilisation communautaire à la veille de 1975', in CERMOC, *Mouvements communautaires et espaces urbains au Machreq* (Beyrouth: Editions du CERMOC, 1985), pp.87-116. The social place of Shiites among the other confessions in Lebanon is analyzed by Claude Dubar and Salim Nasr, *Les classes sociales au Liban* (Paris: Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1976).

5. On Sadr and the Amal movement, see Augustus Richard Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1987) and Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).
6. On Hizbollah, see Shimon Shapira, 'The Origins of Hizbollah', *Jerusalem Quarterly*, No. 46 (Spring 1988), pp.115-30; and Martin Kramer, 'The Moral Logic of Hizbollah', in Walter Reich, ed., *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.131-57.
7. A comprehensive narrative of Lebanese Shi'ite affairs, with an emphasis on this post-1982 period, is provided by Andreas Rieck, *Die Shiiten und der Kampf um den Libanon. Politische Chronik 1958-1988 (Mitteilungen des Deutschen Orient-Instituts, 33)* (Hamburg: Deutsches Orient-Institut, 1989). For the social and military dynamics of the resistance against Israel, see Elisabeth Picard, 'De la communauté-classe à la Résistance Nationale. Pour une analyse du rôle des Chi'ites dans le système politique libanais (1970-1985)', *Revue française de science politique* (Paris), Vol. 35, No. 6 (Dec. 1985), pp.999-1027; and W. A. Terrill, 'Low Intensity Conflict in Southern Lebanon: Lessons and Dynamics of the Israeli-Shi'ite War', *Conflict Quarterly* (Fredrickton, New Brunswick), Vol. 7, No. 3 (1987), pp.22-35.
8. Ahmad Qusayr's identity was first revealed in Hizbollah's weekly newspaper, *al-Ahd* (Beirut), No. 48, 24 May 1985. The biographical information is drawn on the obituaries reproduced in *al-Amaliyyat al-istishhadiyya: Watha'iq wa-suwar* [The Self-Martyring Operations: Documents and Photographs] (Damascus, 1985), pp.22-35.
9. Details on Fahs and photographs, *al-Amaliyyat al-istishhadiyya*, pp.68-81.
10. See Stephen Frederic Dale, 'Religious Suicide in Islamic Asia: Anticolonial Terrorism in India, Indonesia, and the Philippines', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (Beverly Hills, CA), Vol. 32, No. 1 (March 1988), pp.37-59. While Dale interprets these instances in the narrow context of resistance to imperialism, his article suggests that the materials preserved in the records of past colonial governments are rich enough to allow an analysis at other levels, including the sacrificial.
11. Interview with Shaykh Abd al-Karim Ubayd, *al-Safir* (Beirut), 28 July 1986. This is the Shi'ite cleric who gained international renown following his abduction by Israel in July 1989.
12. Al-Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, *al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya: Afaq wa-tatallu' at* (Beirut: Lajnat Masjid al-Imam al-Rida, 1985), p.118.
13. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. by Patrick Gregory, (Baltimore MD and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp.12-13.
14. *Ibid.*, p.20.
15. A photograph of this monument appears in the Lebanese weekly *Nouveau Magazine*, 17 June, 1989, p.60.
16. Dabbuq's obituary in *al-Ahd*, No. 220, 9 Sept. 1988.
17. Speech by Sayyid Ibrahim al-Amin, *al-Ahd*, No. 135, 23 Jan. 1987.
18. For an account of the recent development of this rite, see Yves Gonzales-Quijano, 'Les interprétations d'un rite: célébrations de la "Achoura au Liban"', *Maghreb-Machrek* (Paris), No. 115 (Jan.-Feb.-March 1987), pp.5-28.
19. Speech by Fadlallah, *al-Nahar* (Beirut), 27 Sept. 1985.
20. Interview with Fadlallah, *Politique internationale* (Paris), No. 29 (Autumn 1985), p.268.
21. Interview with Fadlallah, *Middle East Insight* (Washington, DC), Vol. 4, No. 2 (June/July 1985), pp.10-11.
22. Al-Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, *al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya fi al-Janub wal-Biqa al-Gharbi wa-Rashayya: tatallu' at wa-afaq; Nass al-muhadara allati alqaha samahat al-allama al-mujahid al-Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah fi kulliyat*

idarat al-a 'mal wal-iqtisad al-far al-awwal, bi-ta'rikh 19 Shawwal 1404 al-muwafiq 18 Tammuz 1984 (n.p., n.d.), p.18.

23. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p.20.

24. Interview with Fadlallah, *Monday Morning* (Beirut), 16 Dec. 1985. Fadlallah specifically mentioned the operation undertaken by Ahmad Qusayr in Tyre, as well as a later operation near Metulla, as 'successful'.

25. Speech by Fadlallah, *al-Nahar*, 14 May 1985.

26. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p.40.

27. *Ibid.*, p.24.